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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BASRAH 000036

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SUBJECT: SOUTHERN SHIA PERCEPTIONS OF NATIONAL GOVERNMENT POLITICS

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CLASSIFIED BY: Ken Gross, REGIONAL COORDINATOR, REO BASRAH,
DEPARTMENT OF STATE.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (C) Summary: On March 15, the Basrah Regional Coordinator (RC) and Deputy Regional Coordinator (DRC) met with Dr. Wathib Salman Al Gamud, a senior political figure in the Da'awa party in Basrah and member of the Basrah Provincial Council (BPC). Dr. Wathib said that the Shia population in the south would never be able to accept a non-Shia Prime Minister and that moves to replace Ibrahim Jafari were viewed as a Sunni ploy to gain more control in the national government. Dr. Wathib said having a Sunni Vice President or Sunni co-Deputy Prime Minister was a tolerable compromise, but that the southern Shia could not "swallow" having Saleh Mutlak in a high ranking position. The Shia in southern Iraq, he said, interpreted U.S. Ambassador Khalilzad's statement on "non-sectarianism" as an expression of bias toward Sunnis, and they believe that the Sunnis are attempting to manipulate the United States into supporting a greater role for Sunnis in the national government than their minority population merits. End Summary.

Shia Deserve to Rule

12. (C) On March 15, the Basrah RC and DRC met with Dr. Wathib Salman Al Gamud. Dr. Wathib explained that the Shia in southern Iraq realized that Shia make up more than 50 percent of the population of Iraq, and that because they were the majority, this gave them the right to have a Shia Prime Minister. No matter what his weaknesses, Dr. Wathib said, Jafari was infinitely more acceptable as Prime Minister to the southern Shia than any possible non-Shia alternative. The RC stressed that the goal of the U.S. government was to establish a national unity government. Dr. Wathib pointed out that public reaction to the nomination of Jafari as Prime Minister had not been strongly negative; if the public were strongly opposed to Jafari, they would have made their views known through demonstrations. The absence of demonstrations against Jafari, he said, indicated that there was a high degree of tolerance for Jafari as Prime Minister. Dr. Wathib sidestepped the issue of Jafari's negative press coverage.

13. (C) Representing 20-30 percent of the total population, Dr. Wathib said, Sunnis could not expect to take on leadership of the country. Sunnis had a sense of entitlement developed over the past twenty years of over-representation in the national government and were trying to manipulate the outcome of the election to secure a greater role than their numbers merited.

As an example of "Sunni manipulation," Dr. Wathib described how the borders of Anbar province had been drawn so that it represented 30 percent of Iraq's territory, even though its predominantly Sunni population made up only a tiny fraction of the nation. This "gerrymandering," he said, showed the extent to which Sunnis were willing to manipulate facts to serve their interests.

14. (C) Dr. Wathib said that Shia in the south could accept Sunnis holding about 44 seats in the Parliament and about 3 or 4 Ministries because it is proportionately fair. He said that southern Shia accepted having a Sunni Vice President. He described a power-sharing arrangement of two Deputy Prime Ministers, a Sunni and a Kurd, with a Shia as Prime Minister, as being the most acceptable solution to the current impasse on the position of Prime Minister. This way, each of the three major groups in Iraq would be represented at the highest level. Under no circumstance, he said, would southern Shia be able to "swallow" having Saleh Mutlak in a position of power. Mutlak is viewed by southern Shia as a close supporter and collaborator with Saddam. He named Ayad Allawi as a much more acceptable alternative. (Comment: Dr. Wathib also mentioned that Allawi was one of his distant cousins. This may be his personal bias. End Comment)

What the Shia Want From Us

15. (C) Dr. Wathib said that Shia in the south want the United States to convince Sunnis to accept their minority position and not harbor unreasonable expectations for representation in the new government. There is a misperception, he said, of how many Sunnis are actually left in the country. Sunnis believe there are many more of them than there actually are, and this leads them to the conviction that they deserve more control of the government than they are democratically entitled to. Before the Iran-Iraq war, he said, Sunnis made up 30-40 percent of Basrah province. During the Iran-Iraq war and during the 1991 uprising, however, many Sunnis left. The last municipal

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election revealed that only about eight percent of the population was Sunni. Dr. Wathib said that most of the Sunnis who left Basrah went to other countries, not other places in Iraq. (Comment: We find Dr. Wathib's estimation of the Sunni population in Basrah province at eight percent plausible. The estimation of Sunnis at five to ten percent of the population has been reported to the REO by election officials and media polls. Moreover, we believe that Sunnis continue to flee the area. End Comment)

16. (C) U.S. Ambassador Khalilzad's February 20 remarks on "non-sectarianism" sparked a backlash of anti-Americanism among the southern Shia population because these remarks were interpreted as criticism of the Shia, and therefore as support for the Sunni, Dr. Wathib explained. (Comment: Dr. Wathib was careful to explain that these were not his opinions, but that he could understand how the "Shia on the street" would see it this way. End Comment.) By drawing attention to the deepening sectarian divide, this was seen as public criticism of how the Shia government handles its responsibilities, implying that Sunnis would be able to do a better job. These remarks "gave a green light" to Sunnis to attack the Shia, both physically through terrorism and politically by aspiring to more and higher positions in the government.

No Viable Solutions to Ending the British Boycott

17. (C) Dr. Wathib commented that the current suspension of cooperation with the British forces by the BPC arose because the British had unilaterally acted to raid houses and make arrests in Basrah without consulting the BPC. This boycott would last, he said, until the British began consulting with the BPC on a regular basis and working in concert with them. He suggested that if the British had a Basrah police escort with them when it

conducted its arrests on January 23, there would have been no public sentiment backlash. The presence of the Basrah police would have reassured the public that the raids were being conducted with local government approval.

¶18. (C) Dr. Wathib clarified remarks that he had made at a recent Reconstruction and Development Meeting in which he suggested that the BPC boycott include the United States because of Ambassador Khalilzad's February 20th remarks on non-sectarianism. He said that what he had meant was that the BPC should have a universal policy toward all Coalition partners. If they were going to boycott one partner, they should boycott them all. He said that personally, he believed that the BPC decision to boycott the British was becoming more of a hindrance for the council than helping win support for their agenda. Dr. Wathib stated that he believed that the Coalition Forces were in Iraq to help, not as occupiers.

In Sync But Out of Touch

¶19. (C) Comment: Dr. Wathib's willingness to spend nearly two hours with REO personnel demonstrates that he is open to communication with Coalition partners and does not personally support the boycott. His bi-cultural, bilingual background was invaluable in providing insight into how the southern Shia population interprets national politics and what their trigger points might be for even greater sectarian strife.

¶10. (C) Comment continued: In sync with the Shia on the street, Dr. Wathib was a useful contact for gauging Shia public opinion, but less reliable on nearly all other matters. His suggestion of having the British military conduct joint raids with the Basrah police was simply out-of-touch with reality. He was unwilling to accept that militias had infiltrated the Basrah police and were implicated in attacks on the British military. While he was credible in his assessment that the Sunni population of Basrah had greatly diminished over the past twenty years, he also asserted that Sunnis were no longer leaving the region because they were trying to "increase their numbers" in Basrah and take more political control. On the contrary, REO contacts report that Sunni emigration has increased in the past few months because of sectarian violence (reftel A). Dr. Wathib's ineffectual suggestions and inaccurate assessments coincide with reports that the Da'awa party is losing political significance in Basrah (reftel B). Its senior politicians may understand their electorate's concerns, but they are incapable of effective political leadership. End Comment.

¶11. (C) BIONOTE: Dr. Wathib is a neurophysiologist who was educated in the United Kingdom and in Sudan. He left Iraq in 1981 for the United Kingdom, where he taught in medical school for twenty-three years. He holds dual citizenship with Great Britain, and his wife and children reside in Bristol. An active humanitarian, he helped found an orphanage in Basrah that

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currently houses 70 children aged 2-16 and teaches skills courses for homeless teenagers.
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